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Sustainable development and international economic cooperation

Environment and sustainable development

Letter dated 20 March 2001 from the Permanent Representative of the United Arab Emirates to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

On instructions from my Government, I have the honour to transmit to you herewith the text of the Abu Dhabi Declaration on the Future of Environmental Action in the Arab World, which was adopted on 3 February 2001 by the Council of Arab Ministers responsible for environmental affairs at its first special session.

I should be grateful if you would have this letter and its annex circulated as a document of the General Assembly under agenda items 94 and 95.

(*Signed*) Mohammad J. **Samhan**
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

01-29895 (E) 270301 270301

Annex to the letter dated 20 March 2001 from the Permanent Representative of the United Arab Emirates to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Meeting in Abu Dhabi on 3 February 2001 at the opening of the Environment 2001 Conference and Exhibition and with His Highness Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, Head of State of the United Arab Emirates, having returned home in good health to continue his endeavours for the advancement of environmental causes, the Arab Ministers responsible for environmental affairs address to the Arab nation the Abu Dhabi Declaration on the Future of Environmental Action in the Arab World.

Abu Dhabi Declaration on the Future of Environmental Action in the Arab World, 3 February 2001

The Arab Ministers responsible for environmental affairs, meeting in Abu Dhabi on 3 February 2001 at the opening of the Environment 2001 Conference and Exhibition,

Having studied the report entitled "The future of environmental action in the Arab world", prepared at the initiative and with the assistance of the United Nations Environment Programme with the generous support of the United Arab Emirates,

Reaffirming the interest of the Arab region and the world as a whole in environmental issues, as clearly reflected in the Declaration on Environment and Development adopted by the first Arab ministerial meeting on this subject, held in Tunis in 1986, in the Declaration adopted by the Arab Ministerial Meeting on Environment and Development held in Cairo in 1991 (A/46/632, annex), at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the Earth Summit), held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and in the decisions and commitments incorporated in the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development and in Agenda 21, as well as in the recommendations and declarations on environmental issues adopted by international conferences subsequent to the Earth Summit, including the Malmö and Abuja conferences of 2000,

Considering that the Arab world, standing at the threshold of a new century and a new millennium in which the world will undergo far-reaching developments that will have a great impact on all aspects of life as we have heretofore known it, will enter the new era having secured in the past century well-attested and valuable achievements in the development of Arab societies in general (whose impact is clearly apparent in the improvements that have taken place in the health and education and in the social, economic and environmental conditions experienced by Arab citizens), especially in environmental institution-building, the enactment of environmental laws, environmental education and training, the use of environmentally safe and appropriate technologies and positive participation in regional and international environmental conventions and programmes,

(Accelerated development has had an impact on the environment, and this has recently raised the issue of achieving the optimum relationship between the requirements of development and the fight against poverty on the one hand and the imperatives of environmental protection on the other. Consideration of this matter has revealed that there are many negative aspects, including the fact that the promotion of development and of higher incomes for citizens without regard for

environmental considerations has resulted in the intensive exploitation of the environment's resources and in its pollution at a rate that exceeds the capacity to preserve a productive and salubrious environment that can guarantee Arab citizens the sustainable development that will realize their aspirations. This will require greater and more focused attention to modes of action that are more effective than those to which we have been accustomed in the past in order to ensure the proper utilization of the environment's resources, both renewable and non-renewable, on the one hand, and its protection from pollution, on the other.)

Aware that the attainment of this vital goal faces two basic challenges: first, the steady increase in population in the Arab World, which represents a long-term threat if present rates are maintained and if there continues to be an imbalance in population density between, city, countryside and desert within particular countries and among the Arab States; and secondly, the finite nature and depletion of many Arab natural resources,

Noting that despite the fact that we have today the benefit of a considerable amount of experience and expertise not previously available in the context of the various environmental problems that currently face us, whether in understanding such problems or in identifying optimum methods of addressing them, the reality is that those involved in environmental action in the Arab world are still far fewer in number and far less experienced than the situation requires and that institutions for environmental protection in the Arab world are of recent creation, have limited expertise and face difficult and complex challenges,

Aware that most of today's pressing environmental issues are the same as those encountered in the past century, although they have become more acute and the priority accorded to them has differed from one place to another; that the final decades of the past century witnessed the harmful effects of an accelerated pace of industrial development and the continued growth of urban sprawl, leading to a deterioration in the basic urban environment in many Arab countries, to air pollution, to a degradation of land quality, to the pollution of Arab seas and a reduction in their capacity to sustain marine living resources and to a constant diminution in biological diversity on land and in the oceans; and that today these effects appear to be more marked and more acute than they were in the middle of the past century,

Recalling that in recent years there has been a growing interest among Arab citizens in problems such as these, which, should they persist, will represent a genuine threat to the outcome of Arab development efforts; and that this has prompted leaders to make a serious endeavour to inculcate such encouraging trends and to promote this nascent interest in environmental matters and encourage participation in relevant activities by groups of Arab citizens,

Considering that there is a pressing need to elaborate a strategy and formulate a clear future-oriented vision of environmental action in the Arab world to confront present and prospective challenges in the first two decades of the new century,

Believing that this requires a deep knowledge and understanding of the present situation of the environment and of the scale and direction of the changes it is undergoing in the light of a determination of the pressures exerted by the various development activities and the forces driving them and of the impact produced by these pressures on human health, natural resources and the national economy; and

that, on this basis, it will be possible to identify the development issues that are of priority to the Arab world and on which can be constructed the "future vision" of Arab environmental action,

Affirming that globalization and the liberalization of world trade, the information revolution, the growing role of civil society and of popular participation in decision-making and the trend towards decentralization are the most significant innovations at the international level alongside the global changes that directly affect the countries of the Arab region,

The Arab Ministers responsible for environmental affairs declare as follows:

I. There is a pressing need to reduce poverty and to improve the living conditions and economic circumstances of Arab citizens by means of programmes for sustainable development of which one major focus will be the protection of the environment and the prudent use of natural resources.

II. The priority environmental problems facing the Arab world at the beginning of the twenty-first century are:

The acute shortage and deteriorating quality of sources of water;

The paucity and deteriorating quality of exploitable land;

The imprudent consumption of natural resources;

Urban sprawl and its associated problems;

The degradation of marine, coastal and watered areas.

III. The achievement of the desired goals will require the elaboration of a strategy for action that takes account, first, of weaknesses and strengths as revealed by the analysis of past experience and, secondly, a profound understanding of world developments with respect to all matters relating to the various fields of environmental action. The Ministers emphasize the following basic outlines of a strategy for environmental action for the next stage:

1. **Action in accordance with two time frames**: Arab environmental problems are diverse, whether with respect to their causes and results or their current and anticipated effects. It is neither possible nor profitable to address all of them at the same time. This requires that the preparation of environmental remediation and protection plans should take place at two levels. The first should be for the short term and should address urgent problems for which there are genuine chances of success so as to build confidence and promote the allocation of additional resources and thus achieve faster paced action on more profound dimensions in a sustained endeavour for environmental protection and remediation. The second should have the more expansive time perspectives and greater material resources that would make it possible to come to grips with more complex problems requiring, in the first instance, in-depth studies, then the identification of the requirements if they are to be addressed effectively and efficiently and then the provision of such requirements for the achievement of salutary solutions.

2. **A start on eliminating the causes of environmental deterioration before trying to remedy its impact**: To address the impact without eliminating its causes is to waste time, effort and money. If, however, the impact is severe, it

becomes necessary to divide the effort between one approach and the other. Obviously, this situation constitutes a major burden for a society and one that confirms the danger of "displacing" environmental problems from one place to another and from one time to another. The experience of other countries has demonstrated that this leads to enormous losses and to costs that it would have been possible to avoid if the problems had been addressed earlier.

3. **Application of the new environmental accounting methods**: This provides decision makers with precise comparisons between the cost of investment in environmental protection and the scale of the loss that might arise from failure to include the environmental cost in the relevant feasibility study.

4. **Adoption of the "clean production" strategy in its widest sense**: This involves the prudent exploitation of natural resources; avoidance of the use of hazardous substances; increased efficiency of the design and production processes; reduced emissions, runoffs and wastes, whether in production or end-use, to levels the environment can support; environmentally sound waste management; and consideration of the modification of patterns of consumption that have given rise to a societal demand for a particular commodity or service.

5. **Adoption of measures to ensure effective Arab participation in achievements in the field of advanced technology for the improvement of the Arab environment**: Increasing efforts are today being made to achieve important and promising advances in addressing chronic environmental issues connected with meeting the natural resource requirements of development projects, and especially their renewable resource requirements, with reducing pollution levels in production and end-use, with improving the effectiveness of waste recycling and with safer waste disposal. The Arab world must monitor these efforts and must make an active contribution to them that focuses on addressing the urgent problems to which reference has already been made.

6. **Capacity-building, advocacy and institutional development, by**:

(a) Paying greater attention to human development and capacity-building at all levels of action and in all environmental specializations;

(b) Developing curricula at all educational levels so that the environment becomes a basic component with a view to raising a new generation whose members are aware and conscious of their responsibility for environmental protection based on a sound understanding of issues affecting the environment, on conduct that respects it and on positive action to protect it, wherever they may ultimately work;

(c) Providing incentives to the Arab information media to take a greater, more focused and clearer interest in informing Arab citizens of environmental problems, exhorting them to better conduct that supports environmental protection efforts and making them sincere, enthusiastic and faithful advocates of such efforts;

(d) Encouraging civil society to participate actively in decision-making on matters of environmental protection in order to ensure that there is popular participation in the implementation of the relevant decisions; and focusing in this regard on the role of the family and of women;

(e) Developing Arab institutions for environmental action while seeking guidance in the experience of others and basing ourselves on our societal reality and our Arab values; promoting cooperation between such institutions and Arab organizations relevant to environmental issues; and supporting the growing trend in such organizations to include the environmental dimension in their development programmes and activities;

(f) Strengthening the operating mechanisms of the Council in order to ensure the full achievement of the goals for which it was created as they relate to keeping pace with current and future developments in the Arab and international arenas.

7. **Achievement of a qualitative leap in the efforts of scientific research and technological development institutions** to provide the scientific basis and field experience necessary to confront decisively and address the environmental problems that have accumulated in recent years.

8. **Emphasis on the local absorption of water desalination techniques,** the production of reverse osmosis membranes and the importance of methods of water resources management that will achieve balance between consumption patterns and available water resources.

IV. The Ministers seek inspiration, in the implementation of environmental programmes and projects over the next two decades, in the alternatives set forth in the report entitled "Future of environmental action in the Arab world" as a guide to action to achieve the goals of this Declaration.

V. The Ministers stress the need to take effective measures to strengthen the institutional framework for environmental action in the Arab world and for activities ancillary thereto and to make provision for the necessary funding for this framework to perform its functions. In this context:

(a) They welcome the interest taken by the Arab leaders in environmental problems, and they look forward to an item on Arab preparations for the Rio plus 10 conference being included in the agenda for the Arab Summit to be held in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and to the environment being a basic and regular focus of Arab action at the Summit level.

(b) They further welcome the endorsement by the Seventh Islamic Summit, held in Doha in November 2000, of the Jeddah Declaration adopted by the first World Forum on the Environment from an Islamic Perspective, held from 23 to 25 October 2000, and the call for the adoption of its recommendations as the basis of a programme of action to supplement regional environmental programmes of action as well as the international programmes in such a way as to reflect the Islamic perspective on the environment.

(c) They affirm the need for permanent resources to be secured for the funding of programmes to address current and future environmental problems in the region by devising an inter-Arab mechanism to finance environmental investments at the national and regional levels as well as for cooperation and partnerships with industrialized countries and international and regional financial institutions, given that investment in the environment has a much higher return than other investments.

(d) They stress the importance of thorough Arab preparation for the Rio plus 10 conference and consider that such preparation should include the drafting of a comprehensive report that reflects the aspirations of the Arab world, contains a presentation of developments in the environmental field over the past 10 years, sets overall goals, establishes priorities for implementation and identifies the necessary human, institutional and material requirements. They are also of the view, in this context, that it is important that a joint meeting of Arab environment, economy, finance and planning ministers should be convened to approve the topics that must be raised at the conference. They also consider that it is essential to elaborate an integrated scenario for an Arab position in the light of the agreements that will be reached at the meetings of the Arab, African and Islamic environment ministers to be held before the Rio plus 10 conference, given that the unified positions adopted by these ministerial gatherings will have a major impact at the international level.

(e) They call for enhanced Arab cooperation with the group of developing countries (the Group of 77 and China) and with the regional and international groupings that share a common interest in issues of environment and development.

VI. The Ministers are of the view that it is important to reinforce cooperation with the United Nations Environment Programme as the designated environmental agency of the United Nations system. They urge UNEP to cooperate more closely with the Council of Arab Ministers responsible for environmental affairs, in accordance with the terms of the memorandum of understanding concluded at Jeddah in May 1999, so as to promote Arab environmental action and enhance the Council's participation in global environment activities. In this context, they also call on the Secretary-General of the United Nations and on the international community to take the necessary measures to provide UNEP with the financial contributions that will enable it to enhance its role.

VII. The Ministers welcome the fact that the Kingdom of Morocco will host the seventh session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and they urge its support to ensure the success of the meeting.

VIII. The Ministers decide to monitor the implementation of the provisions of this Declaration at the periodic meetings of the Council of Arab Ministers responsible for environmental affairs.